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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relation of social situation variables and children's gender to children's social problem solving ability in potentially unsafe situations. A total of 62 preschoolers (mean age 4.4 years) were shown a series of four vignettes. In two vignettes, an adult or a child asked a second child to cross a street. In two other vignettes, an adult or a child asked a second child to "touch private parts." Thus the social variables in the vignettes were relative ages of social partners and the sexual or nonsexual nature of the unsafe situation. Children were asked to provide as many solutions to the social problem as they could, and their responses were categorized into strategy types. Results indicated no significant relations between age of social partners in the vignette and other variables. Children offered fewer solutions to sexual than to nonsexual dilemmas. Children offered more assertive, rule-based, and help-seeking solutions to nonsexual situations and more nonconfrontational solutions to sexual situations. Girls offered significantly more nonconfrontational solutions to sexual situations than did boys. These results suggest an impairment of preschoolers' generation of strategies in sexual problem situations. A reference list of 12 items is included. (BC)

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PRESCHOOLERS' PROBLEM-SOLVING IN SEXUALLY ABUSIVE AND NON-SEXUAL SITUATIONS

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Introduction

Rubin and Krasnor (1983) define social problem solving (or "SPS") as "the ability to attain personal goals during a social interaction." Research has focused almost exclusively on assessing children's SPS ability in commonly occurring social dilemmas such as obtaining a toy or making new friends (e.g., Getz, Goldman, & Corsini, 1984; Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976; Weissberg, Gesten, Rapkin, Cowen, Davidson, de Apodaca, & McKim, 1981). Yet children must also utilize SPS skills to negotiate less common situations that compromise their safety. For example, a child must employ SPS skills (such as alternative strategy generation) in order to resist a request to engage in unwanted sexual touching. One goal of our study was to explore factors which affect children's SPS ability in unsafe situations.

Previous studies indicate that in common social dilemmas, two situational factors -- the age of the social partner (Holmberg, 1980; Krasnor, 1982; Rubin & Krasnor, 1983; Whiting & Whiting, 1975) and the nature of the social problem (Krasnor, 1982; Krasnor 1983) -- and one subject variable -- the gender of the child (Barnett, Darcie, Holland, & Kobasigawa, 1981; Marsh, Serafica, & Barenboim, 1981) -- influence children's strategizing. For instance, children tend to use prosocial strategies with adults or older children and aggressive strategies with younger children (Krasnor, 1982; Rubin & Krasnor, 1983). Regarding the influence of the social problem, observational research suggests that children use commands to stop another child from engaging in an activity, and descriptive statements to gain attention (Krasnor, 1982; Krasnor, 1983). Lastly, the effect of subject gender on strategy choice is reflected in the finding that boys produce a greater number of aggressive strategies than do girls (Barnett et al., 1981; Marsh et al., 1981).

Our study examined whether or not these situational and subject variables also affected children's SPS ability in potentially unsafe situations. We hypothesized that the quantity and type of SPS strategies would be influenced by the following factors:

1. The age of the social partner (child vs. adult)
2. The nature of the social problem (non-sexual vs. sexual)
3. The gender of the subject (boys vs. girls)

Method

Participants were 62 preschoolers (32 boys, 30 girls) from six preschools. Their mean age was 4.4 years. Ninety percent of the subjects were Caucasian, 8% were African American, and 2% were Asian American.

SPS was assessed by presenting four hypothetical problem situations in story form. Each vignetted systematically varied the age of the social partner and the nature of the problem. Age of social partner was manipulated by describing an incident involving either a peer or an adult. The nature of the problem was varied by presenting children with a story depicting either a non-sexual or a potentially sexually abusive situation. (For the remainder of the talk I'll refer to these potentially sexually abusive situations that involve a request to touch private parts as the "sexual" situations, since it's a bit shorter.) The central action of each story was depicted in the following pictures: in the first vignette, one child asks a second child to cross a street that the second child is not allowed to cross (see Drawing A). In vignette number two, a child asks a second child to "touch private parts" even though the second child does not want to (see Drawing B). In vignette three, an adult asks a child to cross a street the child is not allowed to cross (see Drawing C). And in the

fourth vignette, an adult asks a child to "touch private parts" even though the child does not want to (see Drawing D). The gender of the characters in the vignettes was matched to the gender of the subject so that boys were presented with stories involving only male characters and girls were presented with stories involving only females.

Vignettes were read to each child individually and were accompanied by the drawings you just saw. After each vignette, children were asked what the target child in the story could do or say if he/she did not want to go along with the suggested activity. Children were asked to generate "as many solutions as they could think of." [1] Responses were recorded verbatim. Interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes.

Children's responses were then classified into one of the ten categories shown on this slide. I'm going to limit my discussion to the first four categories since those are the ones for which we obtained significant results. [2]

A few examples may help clarify these categories. Responses such as "He should say 'no, I won't do that.'" were classified as assertive solutions. A common rule-based response was "He should say 'My parents said not to do that." "She should go ask her Mom if she can do it" was a typical help-seeking strategy. The most common non-confrontational solution was "She should run away."

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[1] For a copy of the measurement instrument, please contact the first author at Michigan State University, Department of Psychology, 129 Psychology Research Building, East Lansing, MI, 48824-1117.

[2] For a copy of the scoring manual please contact the first author at Michigan State University, Department of Psychology, 129 Psychology Research Building, East Lansing, MI, 48824-1117.

Results

The two SPS variables -- quantity and type of solutions -- were analyzed in a series of 2 X 2 X 2 mixed-model ANOVAs. Age of the social partner (the 2 levels being child vs. adult) and nature of the problem (the 2 levels being non-sexual and sexual) were considered within-subjects factors and gender (boys vs. girls) was considered a between-subjects factor.

The quantity of solutions children generated was not affected by the age of the social partner or the gender of the subject. However, the nature of the problem did significantly affect the total number of solutions (see Figure 1). Children suggested fewer strategies to sexual social dilemmas than they did to non-sexual situations. (For the following series of slides, the bar graph indicates the direction of the effect and the F and p values for that effect are noted below the graph.)

Next, we examined the types of strategies children offered. As with the previous analysis, there were no main effects for the age of social partner. The nature of social problem, however, did significantly affect children's strategy choice. Children offered more assertive, rule-based, and help-seeking solutions in non-sexual than in sexual problem situations (see Figure 2). However, for non-confrontational solutions, this relationship reverses. Here, children provided more responses to sexual situations (see Figure 2). In addition, there was a main effect for gender. Over all stories, boys offered significantly fewer non-confrontational solutions than did girls (see Figure 3).

These main effects are further explained by a number of significant interactions. For non-confrontational solutions the Gender X Social Problem interaction reached significance. Boys suggested about the same number of non-

confrontational solutions to non-sexual and sexual dilemmas. Girls, however, suggested more of these solutions to a sexual than to a non-sexual problem situation (see Figure 4).

Two interactions approached significance for help-seeking solutions. In the Gender X Social Problem interaction, girls chose help-seeking solutions with nearly equal frequency in the non-sexual and sexual problem situations. Boys, however, offered fewer help-seeking solutions in sexual as compared to non-sexual dilemmas (see Figure 5). The Age of Social Partner X Social Problem interaction also approached significance. In situations involving an adult social partner, children suggested help-seeking about as often in non-sexual and sexual situations. However, when the social partner was a child, children choose help-seeking solutions much more frequently in non-sexual than in sexual situations (see Figure 6).

Discussion

These results are relevant to both the social problem solving and child sexual abuse prevention literatures. We did not find a main effect for age. So our hypothesis that preschoolers would vary their SPS solutions according to the age of the social partner was not supported. This finding is at variance with existing research on children's SPS in common dilemmas (e.g., Rubin & Krasnor, 1983).

One explanation for such a discrepancy has been suggested by Rubin and Krasnor (1983). They propose that children's sensitivity to the characteristics of the social partner depends upon the nature of the social problem. This argument suggests that children's strategy choice, rather than being statically controlled by a predictable set of factors, is determined by the interplay of situational elements which

increase and recede in importance depending upon the nature of the problem. Thus the age of the partner affects how children strategize in commonly occurring benign dilemmas such as obtaining a toy, but seems to be less important in unsafe encounters. Since in this study we were concerned only with children's SPS skills in unsafe dilemmas, one possible direction for future research is to test Rubin & Krasnor's contention directly by systematically comparing within the same study children's SPS in both commonly occurring benign social dilemmas (such as obtaining a toy) and different types of unsafe situations (like the ones used in our study).

Our results supported our second hypothesis that the nature of the social problem influences children's SPS strategies. For three strategy categories (assertive, rule-based, and help-seeking), children suggested significantly fewer solutions to sexual than to non-sexual dilemmas. Their responses to the non-sexual dilemmas indicate they are capable of generating effective self-protective strategies. What, then, accounts for their failure to suggest these strategies in sexual situations?

Script theory provides one possible explanation. Briefly, script theory argues that we possess "mental blue prints" for the usual sequence of actions in common events (Schank & Abelson, 1977). These "scripts" can help us to understand and respond effectively to social situations (Langer, 1978). Perhaps preschoolers possess a script which dictates the enactment of assertive, rule-based, and help-seeking strategies in common non-sexual social dilemmas.

For example, when a child encounters a dilemma such as being asked to cross a street he/she is not allowed to cross, situational cues trigger a memory of similar incidents and the assertive responses that had successfully terminated previous

encounters. Perhaps the script also includes parental admonishments that children can get hurt crossing busy streets. Thus, this script enables the child to gauge the appropriateness of the request and enact resistance strategies.

However, since a request to engage in sexual touching is uncommon, children might generalize the script used in more common resistance situations to this unusual event. Therefore, they fail to enact even well-known resistance strategies. This interpretation of the data is supported by research on the development of scripts in children. This research indicates that children as young as three years possess scripts for common situations (Nelson, 1978). However, young children are preoccupied with the concrete details of a script and do not easily generalize scripted behavior to new situations (Nelson, 1981).

In addition, this interpretation of the data is supported by our finding that the effect for social problem was strongest for rule-based solutions. Rule-based responses such as "No, we could get hurt, my parents said I should never cross this street" reflect an understanding of the event and knowledge of appropriate versus inappropriate behavior. Thus rule-based solutions most directly reflect the use of a script for a that situation.

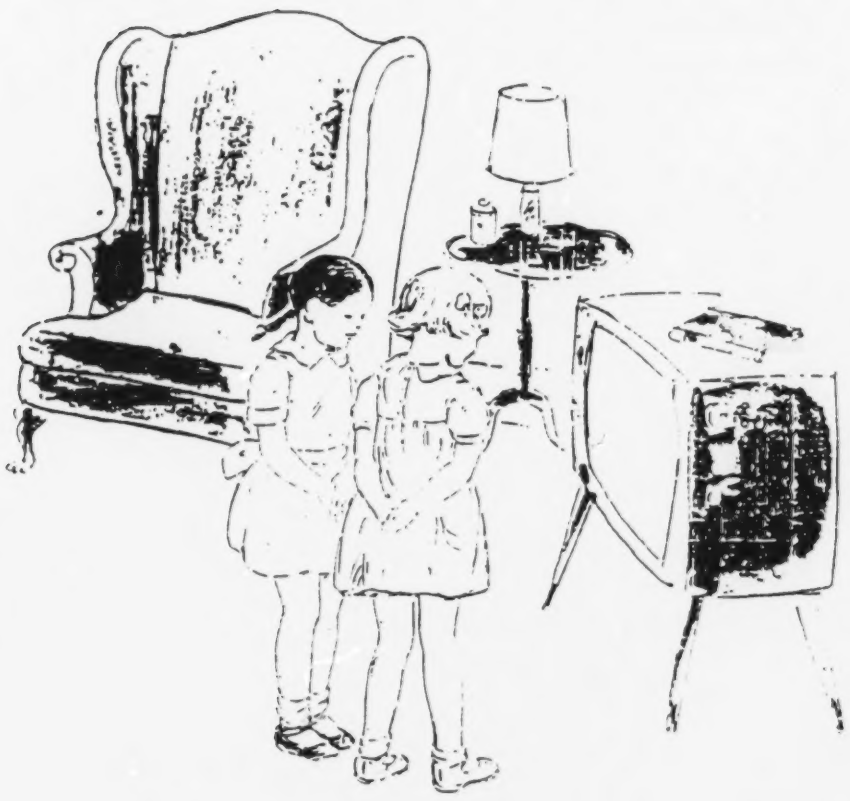
The main effect for social problem is also relevant to child sexual abuse prevention efforts. The finding that children offer more non-confrontational but fewer assertive, help-seeking, and rule-based solutions to sexual situations indicates that their repertoire of self-protective strategies may be very limited. Sexual abuse prevention programs teach children number of self-protective strategies, such as saying "no," and telling an adult. So these programs may be able help to remediate preschooler's deficits in assertive and help-seeking strategies.

Our hypothesis regarding the influence of gender was only partly supported by the data. The Gender X Social Problem interactions indicate that, in sexual situations, boys are less likely than girls to suggest effective strategies. Therefore, once they are asked to engage in unwanted sexual touching, boys may be at greater risk for actual sexual abuse because they utilize fewer effective strategies to stop the unwanted touching. Child sexual abuse prevention curricula need to direct attention to sexually abusive episodes involving boys and emphasize that help-seeking and non-confrontation are strategies that boys as well as girls can use.

This study's results suggest that preschooler's strategy generation is impaired in sexual problem situations. However, strategy generation is only one component of social problem solving (for a review see Dodge, 1986; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986). Further research is needed to determine whether other components of preschooler's SPS are impaired in sexually abusive encounters. For example, another critical component of SPS is the encoding process. It is important to determine whether or not preschoolers accurately encode situational cues in a potentially sexually abusive encounter. Clearly, both SPS research and child sexual abuse prevention efforts can benefit from further exploration of children's problem solving in sexual and non-sexual unsafe situations.

Drawing A

Drawing B



Drawing C

Drawing D

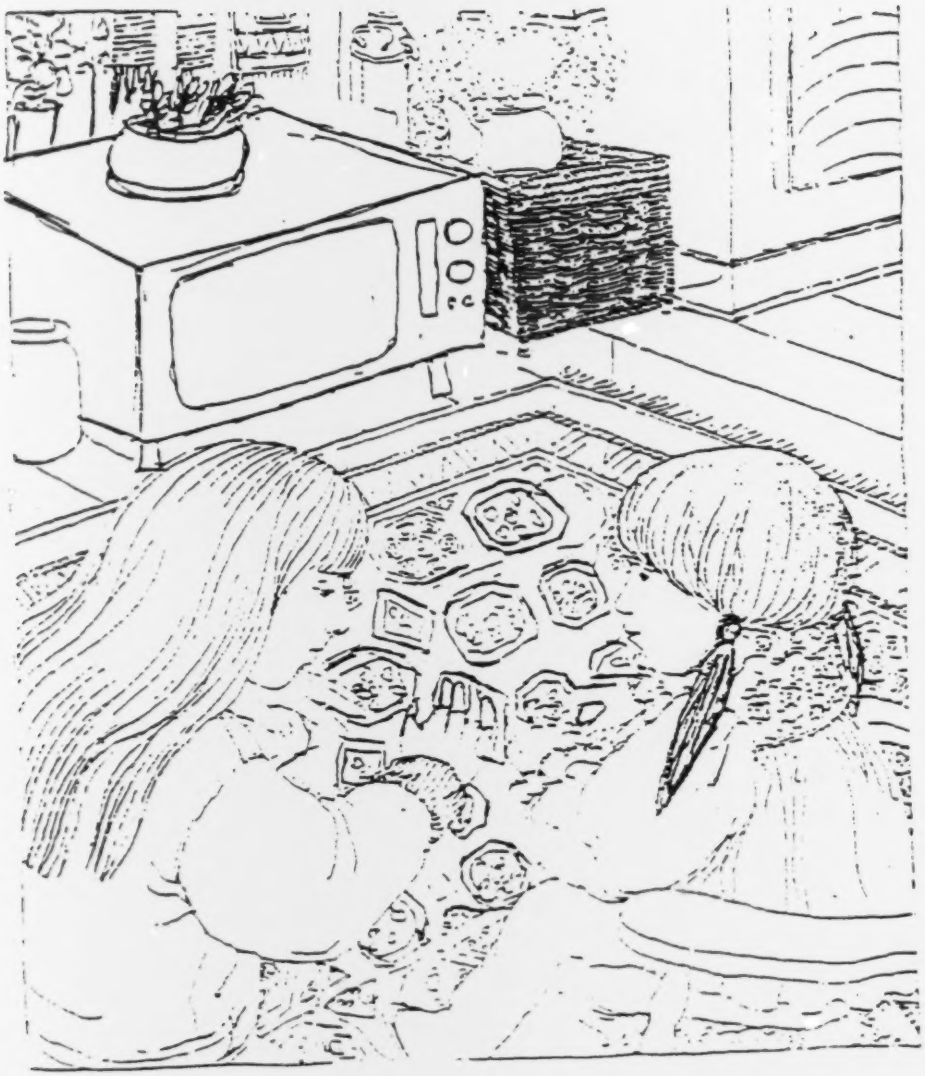
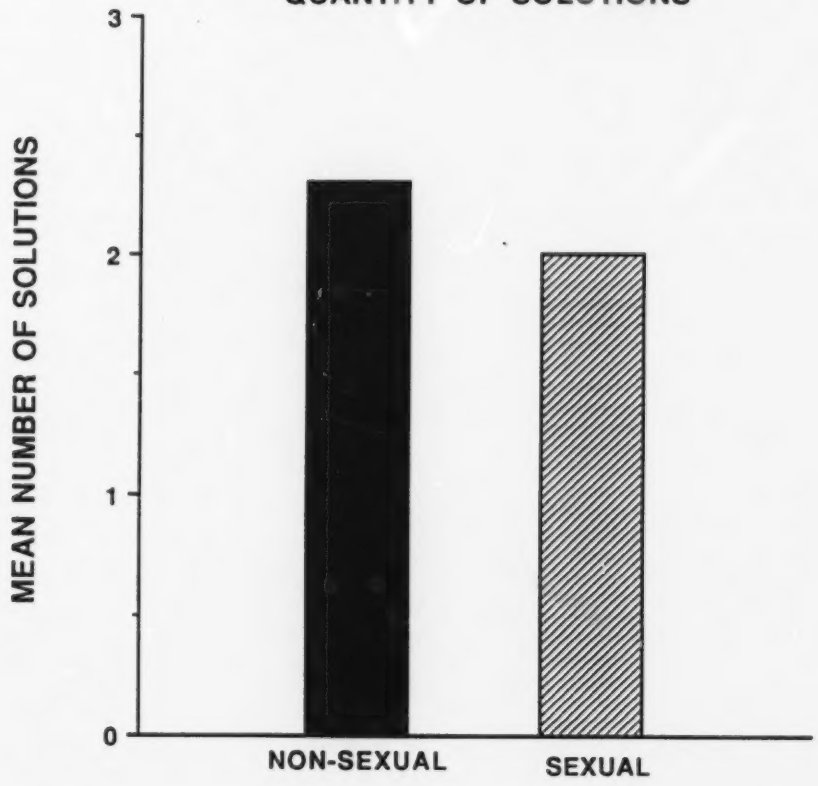


FIGURE 1

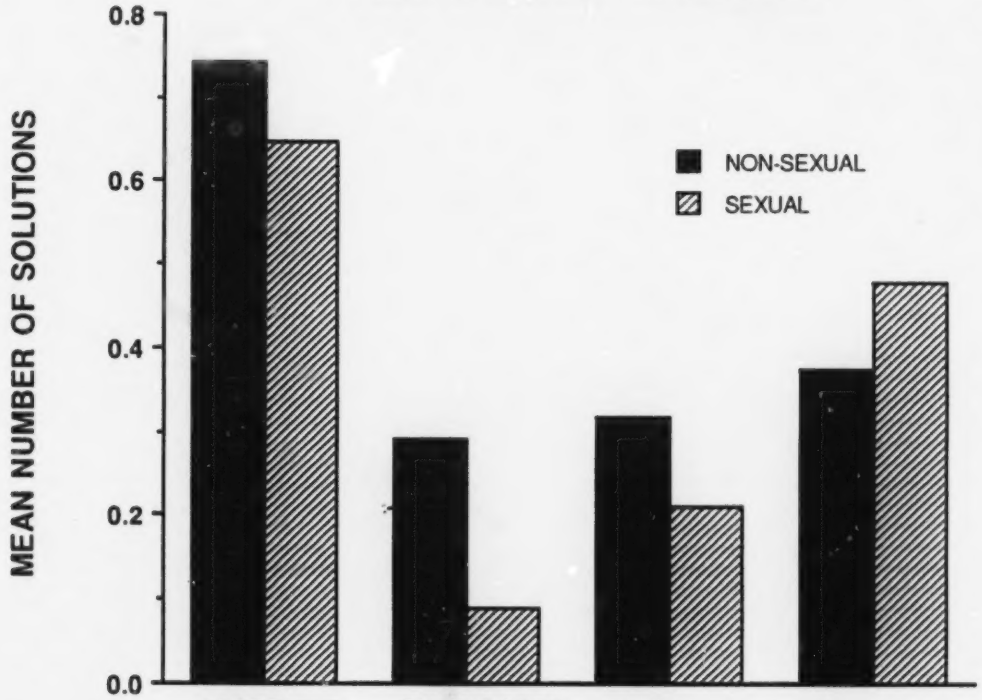
INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL PROBLEM ON QUANTITY OF SOLUTIONS



F = 11.16, p = .001

FIGURE 2

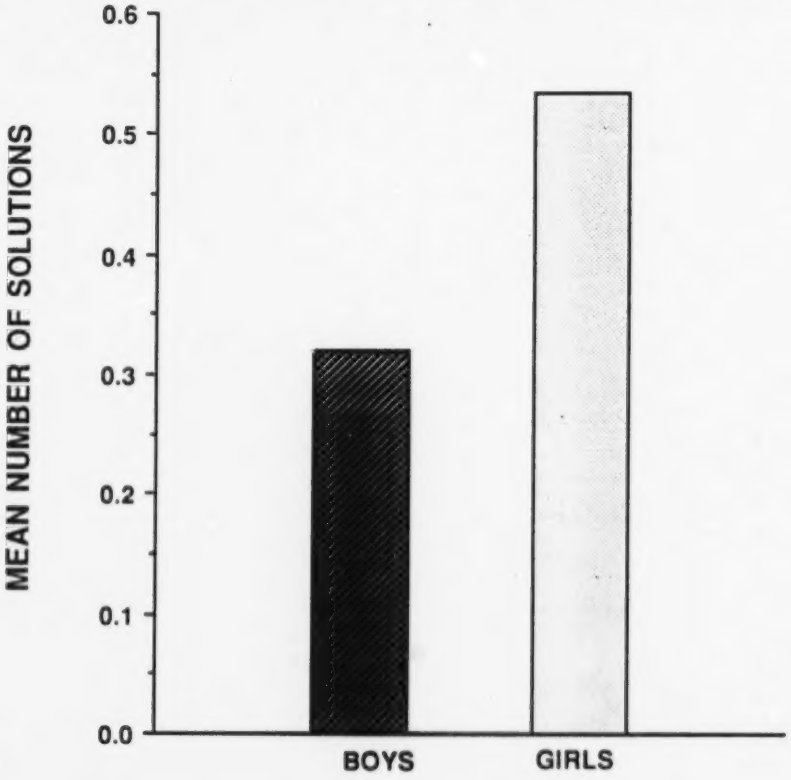
INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL PROBLEM ON FOUR STRATEGY CATEGORIES



	ASSERTIVE	RULE-BASED	HELP-SEEKING	NON-CONFRONTATIONAL
F =	5.21	21.61	8.20	6.19
p =	.026	.001	.006	.016

FIGURE 3

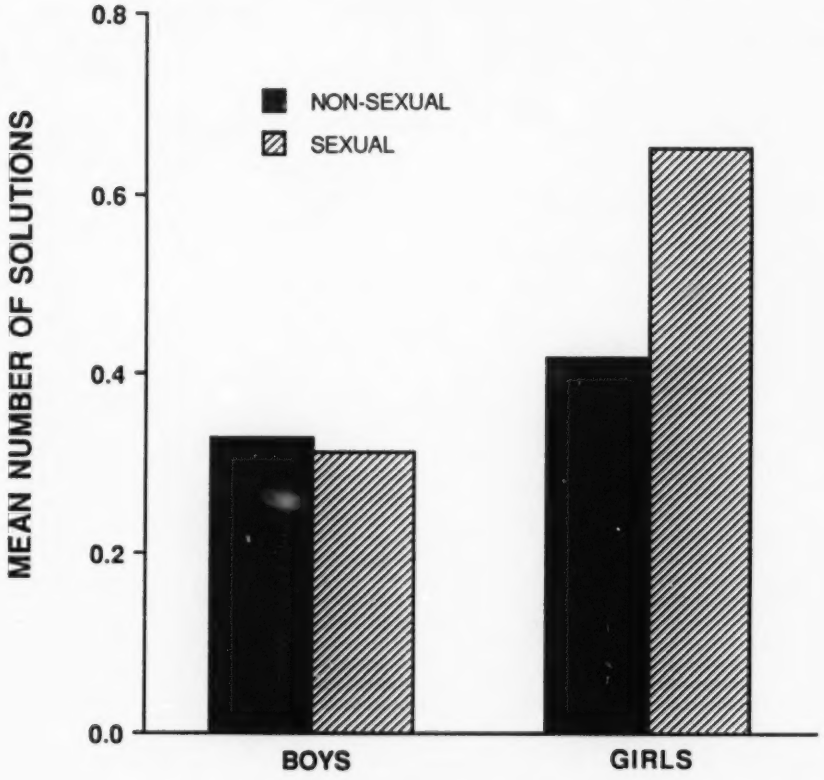
INFLUENCE OF SUBJECT GENDER
ON NON-CONFRONTATIONAL SOLUTIONS



F = 5.72, p = .020

FIGURE 4

INFLUENCE OF SUBJECT GENDER AND SOCIAL PROBLEM ON NON-CONFRONTATIONAL SOLUTIONS



F = 8.10, p = .006

FIGURE 5

INFLUENCE OF SUBJECT GENDER AND SOCIAL PROBLEM ON HELP-SEEKING SOLUTIONS

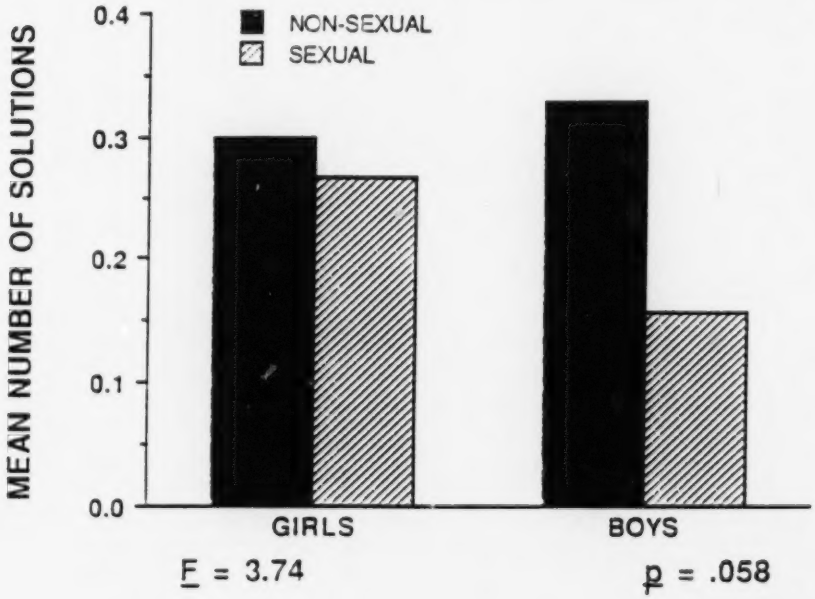
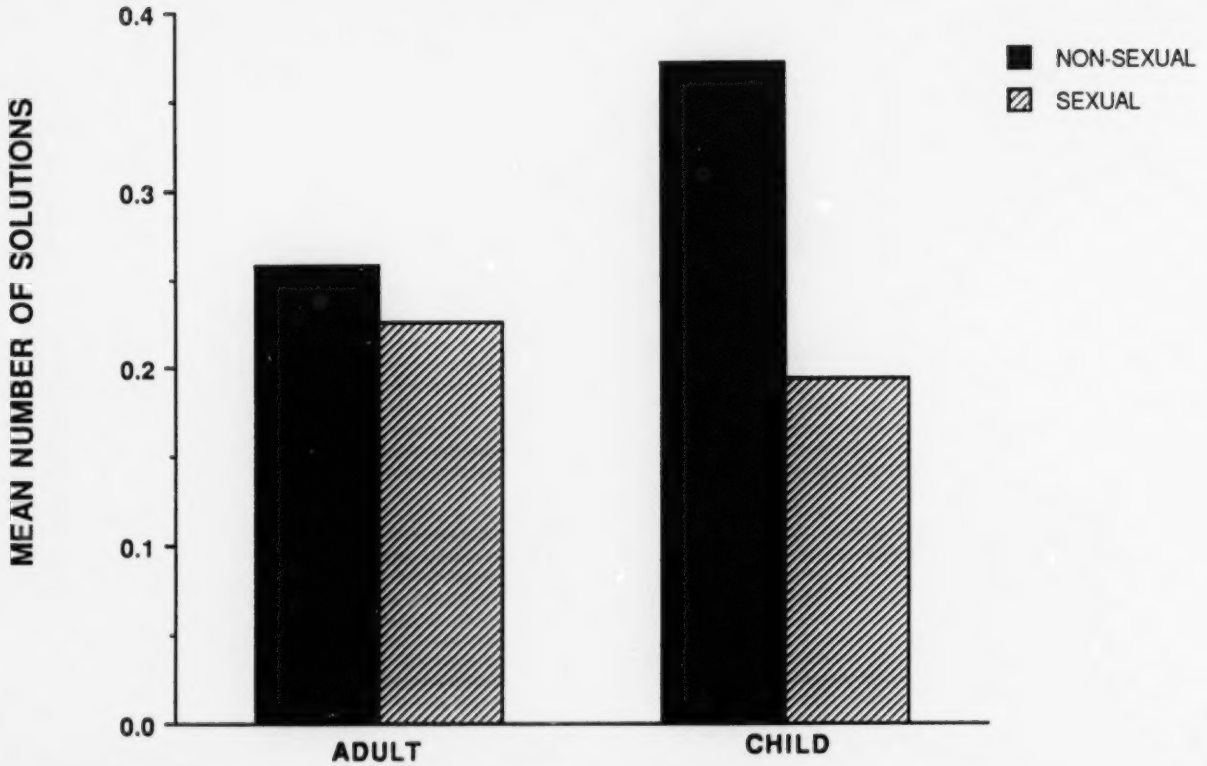


FIGURE 6

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL PARTNER AGE AND SOCIAL PROBLEM ON HELP-SEEKING SOLUTIONS



F = 3.03, p = .087

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